

Council Rejects House for Homeless

Montgomery to Use Site in Park Plans

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The Montgomery County Council rejected a proposal yesterday to use a sprawling Bethesda house to shelter a homeless family as a slim majority turned aside impassioned arguments that the affluent county needs to do more to welcome needy residents in prosperous neighborhoods.

After a bitter debate in which insults were traded and motives were questioned, council members voted 5 to 4 to open the way for the county's park and planning agency to tear down the house in the Hillmead neighborhood and use the land to expand a neighborhood park.

The leading opponent, council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), said the county did not do enough to notify neighbors that the house might be used for the homeless, but instead left them with the impression that the property would become part of a park. He and other opponents denied accusations that they were



BY SUSAN BECKLE — THE WASHINGTON POST

The council vote opens the way for this house in Bethesda's Hillmead neighborhood to be torn down and the site used to expand a public park.

uninterested in helping the poor.

The debate over the fate of the 1930s-era house, which has raged for months on neighborhood e-mail discussion groups and in a flood of letters to county officials, has grown to symbolize tensions over how the county should expand its dwindling stock of affordable housing as the economic gap between Montgomery's haves and have-nots has widened.

Council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), who grew up in Bethesda and lives in Takoma Park, led the fight to use the house for homeless residents. He cast the dispute as a "moral issue" that allows the county's wealthy to do little other than write checks or participate in fundraising walks to help the homeless. The vote

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yesterday could push more low-income residents into neighborhoods such as Silver Spring and Germantown and relieve others of responsibility to help the less fortunate, he said.

Leventhal repeatedly questioned the liberal bona fides of the nine-member council, and the county itself, for years dominated by progressive Democrats.

"I would never support anything that I believed placed my constituents' safety and security at risk," he said, adding that politicians "mustn't create a process that gives veto power to neighbors over who gets to move into the neighborhood. That would be blatantly discriminatory and violate the principle of open housing."

His views were echoed by council member Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring), the only African American on the council. "Segregated housing," she said, citing a recent study, "often defines what schools you will go to, what employers you will have access to."

Those views were countered by Berliner, who represents the county's most affluent residents in Chevy Chase, Bethesda and Potomac. Berliner, a lawyer, said the debate is more about due process for Hillmead, a community that he said has



Roger Berliner said the county did not do enough to tell neighbors that the site might house the homeless.

been maligned during the debate. He also noted a nearby large shelter in the Hillmead neighborhood.

"This is not one of the great moral issues of our time; it is not a singular moment that will define our commitment to civil rights or our social welfare," he said.

"I resent the suggestion that all the opponents are small minded and rich," Berliner said. "The world is not always black and white, moral crusaders versus selfish louts. I am as confident in the rightness of my [position] as my colleague is in the righteousness of his."

Council member Marc Elrich (D-

At Large) said he concluded that the property could not effectively be used simultaneously as housing and a park addition. He called arguments by supporters of the housing plan "banal."

Council member Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large), who voted against the plan, called the debate "toxic" and urged the council to take a comprehensive look at how and where to build affordable housing.

Elrich, Trachtenberg, Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) and Donald Praisner (D-East County) gave Berliner the needed majority to block the housing plan. Voting with Leventhal were Ervin, Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) and the council's president, Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty).

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has said acquiring affordable housing is one of his administration's chief goals, but he has largely stayed on the sidelines in the Hillmead dispute.

The issue arose after the planning board approved construction of four luxury townhouses on the site. Landowner Phyllis Piotrow's deal with a developer fell through, and she then sold the 1.3 acre property, and the house, to the park system. With the council's approval, the parks agency bought the site for \$2.5 million. The council also told

the park system to delay destroying the building until its potential to house the homeless or other special-needs residents can be determined.

Residents of Hillmead, a leafy community about three miles from downtown Bethesda with small Cape Cods and large McMansions selling for more than \$1 million, said the county did a poor job of keeping them informed about plans.

At the same time, the neighborhood's affection for the park has been mixed. Many residents sat on the sidelines as two neighbors pressed the planning board to add to the park rather than allow the luxury townhouses. But later, neighborhood sentiment grew for the plan to expand the park.

Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson, whose agency manages and rents about 70 houses in county parks, including six as group homes, opposed the plan to keep the house.

The proposal to use the house for a homeless family was first floated publicly last year by Floreen, and supported by the then-president of the council, Marilyn Praisner, and Leventhal. Praisner died in February. Her husband, Don Praisner, elected to succeed her, took the opposite position yesterday and provided the deciding vote.